

Proposal for an Iraq Moratorium

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Introduction.

The anti-war movement today has played a key role in building majority support among the American people to end the war and occupation of Iraq. While several million people have participated in mass marches, vigils, educational forums, petition and letter writing, engaged in or supported war resisters and anti-war veterans, lobbying, the publication and dissemination of articles, leaflets, studies, art and other activities to end the war, tens of millions of people who oppose the war are primarily passive in their opposition. The most active opposition for most of these tens of millions was expressed in the November 2006 election when they voted a significant number of pro-war congressional representatives out of office and voted in mostly anti-war representatives, though of varying degrees of anti-war commitment. While this was important, it wasn't enough to stop the Bush Administration from continuing the war.

The next major step in the anti-war movement should be to create a forum where many of these tens of millions of relatively passive anti-war people feel comfortable participating in some form of *public* expression of opposition to the war and occupation of Iraq. During the war on Vietnam, the Vietnam Moratorium did exactly that. When it brought the anti-war movement into that huge swath of middle America that set in motion a process that ultimately crippled the Nixon Administration's ability to conduct the war. An Iraq Moratorium can do the same thing.

Vietnam Moratorium.

The lessons of the Vietnam Moratorium are instructive. The Vietnam Moratorium, held in the fall of 1969, was a big step forward for the anti-war movement because it successfully drew millions of mostly political moderates into *public* opposition to the war for the first time. It did this because of the two key principles it was organized around: (1) it asked the members of the public to "stop business as usual" on a specific date in order to express *their* opposition to the war in ways that *they* chose and felt comfortable with, and (2) it was organized specifically to appeal to and involve people who were politically moderate (a group which was and is many, many times larger than the anti-war movement), and to give that huge group of moderates *their own day* and *their own organization*.

Prior to the Vietnam Moratorium, most public anti-war activity – marches, forums, and other activities, were seen as having been organized by "radicals," "leftists" or "political activists," people who that large moderate mainstream did not want to be identified with. I grew up in Buffalo and was a student radical on the University of Buffalo campus during that period. But I got involved in helping to organize the Vietnam Moratorium in Buffalo precisely because I felt strongly that we had to broaden the movement beyond the campus, and beyond the radicals. The Vietnam Moratorium was so broadly organized in Buffalo (as it was in many cities and towns across the country), that our very moderate mayor declared October 15 Buffalo Moratorium Day, the City Council passed a resolution supporting it, and a long calendar of Moratorium events was published in the major newspapers advertising every event. Moratorium activities were planned by a wide array of organizations that day in many communities and neighborhoods across the city, including a number of educational forums held in Buffalo high school auditoriums, and a

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large ecumenical church service at a major church in downtown Buffalo that evening. Since similar activities took place in large cities and small towns and villages all over the country on October 15, the collective impact of October 15, 1969 was to undercut Nixon's claim that the large "silent majority" of Americans supported him and his war policy. That was important.

The gains were both short term and longer term. We became aware of one of the most important immediate gains when Seymour Hersh reported that the Nixon Administration was so shaken by the breadth of anti-war sentiment, both on October 15 and on November 15, 1969 (with the marches in Washington DC and San Francisco), that administration plans which were in the works at that time to significantly increase the bombing of Vietnam, including the high possibility of using nuclear weapons, were scrapped. (Unfortunately, the leaders of the Vietnam Moratorium couldn't keep it going as a national movement beyond November – there were a number of small activities in December and January 1970 and maybe beyond, but the Moratorium was spent as a major political force after November 1969.)

However, the breadth of the Vietnam Moratorium activities, especially on October 15, 1969, led a growing number of congressional representatives to become concerned about the increasing level of anti-war sentiment in *their* districts because it could threaten their re-election if they didn't adopt an anti-war position.

The major gain was that the Vietnam Moratorium marked the beginning of a shift in the balance of power in the country, as a significant part of the large moderate middle broke with President Nixon's pro-war policies for the first time, and other moderates participated in some *public* activity that expressed opposition to the war for the first time. The Vietnam Moratorium started a process of eroding the political base of the war-makers and moving that base into the anti-war camp. While that shift wasn't enough in the fall of 1969 to tip the balance of power to the anti-war forces, the process continued until Congress ultimately (unfortunately it took several more years) cut off funds for the war and withdrew all US troops. (With US funds and troops gone from Vietnam, the corrupt Saigon regime collapsed and the war ended.) Today, we have made some inroads into the moderate mainstream. But a well thought-out Iraq Moratorium, organized around the same principles of the Vietnam Moratorium, and on the scale of October 15, 1969, could greatly speed up this process.

Iraq Moratorium.

UFPJ members could play a key role in helping to initiate the Iraq Moratorium, though I think organizationally the Iraq Moratorium should be a separate, independent organization. Our task should be to identify key mainstream leaders -- progressives who are respected by moderate leaders, and moderates (who should probably make up the majority), who we think might be interested in forming an Iraq Moratorium and to begin a discussion process with them. We can make a general proposal and invite proposals from them. It is important that the Iraq Moratorium have its own leaders, its own agenda and its own life. We can help initiate it and help with guidance and technical support. If it is not seen as an organization committed to helping moderates express their anti-war views in the way they choose, few moderates will get involved.

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The overall structure should be lean. There should be a national Moratorium office and perhaps several regional offices in major regions of the country. The main task of these offices would be to do outreach to organizations and key people in that region, introduce them to the Moratorium mission, and assist them in setting up whatever activities they choose, including getting out buttons and other campaign materials, literature, etc.

There will likely be a wide array of events and activities and views expressed under the Moratorium umbrella. That is how it should be. That diversity is its strength. UFPJ members and organizations can get involved in the Iraq Moratorium to help create that open forum for moderates, and to conduct our own activities. We should see the Iraq Moratorium as a big tent, with enough room under it for everyone who is doing anything against the war and occupation of Iraq that is legal and peaceful. But I think the more progressive forces should be careful not to over-shadow the initiatives of moderates or the moderates will feel that the organization has moved away from them, and many or most will leave. Most progressives have their own organizations, which we will continue to work within and build. But this project envisions us helping moderates create their own organization so *they* can activate many millions of other moderates that *we* can't reach. That is the major goal.

Calendar.

The Vietnam Moratorium was conceived to take place each month, beginning with one day of activity on October 15, 1969, two days of activities in November, three days in December and so on, until the war ended. October 15 was a huge success, way beyond what organizers ever expected. Yet, the national organizers were so exhausted trying to keep up with the avalanche of requests for information, buttons, and other things that came to them from around the country for October 15, that they weren't able to prepare for November. Luckily, the large national anti-war coalition, the New Mobilization Committee, had already been planning for many months large demonstrations in Washington DC and a west coast demonstration in San Francisco. The Moratorium endorsed those marches so those marches became the Moratorium (and Mobe) events for November. By December, the national Moratorium was having great difficulty, but there were a number of mostly very modest local activities around the country organized by local people but with virtually no national Moratorium help. This marked the end of the Moratorium as a national political force. We can't let that happen with an Iraq Moratorium.

Did the Moratorium die because the national leaders couldn't continue, or was it because when large numbers of politically moderate people try something once or twice and it doesn't bring the desired results, they call it quits, or some other reasons -- like internal disputes. Probably, all of these reasons were factors.

Let's take the calendar timeline first. It might be worth looking at a different schedule than monthly Moratoriums. Many small local events, like vigils, can be done once a month, but larger events take more time to prepare and are hard to do every month. I think it would be difficult to keep it up. If we organized two, three or four Iraq Moratoriums a year (perhaps early spring, late spring, early autumn and late autumn, or just two or three of those time periods), that would give us more time in between Moratorium day(s) to prepare for the next one. (Of course, the active anti-war groups will continue to plan their activities as they see fit, and on whatever time table they decide upon, and that's good.)

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One way to build large Moratorium events is to explore combining our efforts with already existing events, especially with large organizations and constituencies who already have planned events and celebrations on regular dates every year. For example, if the Iraq Moratorium consulted with key Black and religious organizations well in advance of Martin Luther King Birthday celebrations, could we find agreement that some important Martin Luther King celebrations could be done while incorporating an Iraq Moratorium Day component in mid-January? We could highlight MLK's quest for peace, justice and equality in his day and show the connection to these same issues today, both in Iraq and at home. Or prior to Labor Day in early September, could we get major unions to agree that the traditional Labor Day celebrations would incorporate an Iraq Moratorium message on or near that date? Perhaps we could find common ground in showing respect for both American and Iraqi workers, and all those who suffer in the war. Maybe we would have a week of Iraq Moratorium activities in January where MLK celebrations would be one of many Moratorium events (possibly the biggest though). Same with Labor Day week.

Other important dates not tied to a celebration include April 15 (income tax return deadline date) where we could make connections to money spent on the war and not on social services in our communities; and/or late October or early November in election years with a focus on influencing the elections. Picking these dates would require a lot of work since we would be starting from almost scratch, (except the Iraq Moratorium could hopefully hook-up with people already doing election work.) Or we could just pick days not tied to any existing event, as we often do for demonstrations and other events.

If we move in the direction of trying to combine Moratorium activities with big existing events, we would have to develop a well-thought out plan of how to work with these major constituencies in a way that was completely respectful of their day(s) of celebration, and where they saw the Moratorium activities as making a contribution to their activities. If we could do Moratorium activities in conjunction with these celebrations, we should also help other people develop stand-alone Moratorium activities for those who may not want to combine events.

These are some initial thoughts. I am certainly open to other ideas and proposals regarding an Iraq Moratorium and look forward to seeing what others are thinking about. My main goal is to work together to come up with a strong unified proposal for an Iraq Moratorium to present to the UFPJ Assembly. (I have shared my thoughts with the Coalition for World Peace in Los Angeles and will share their feed-back as I receive it.)

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